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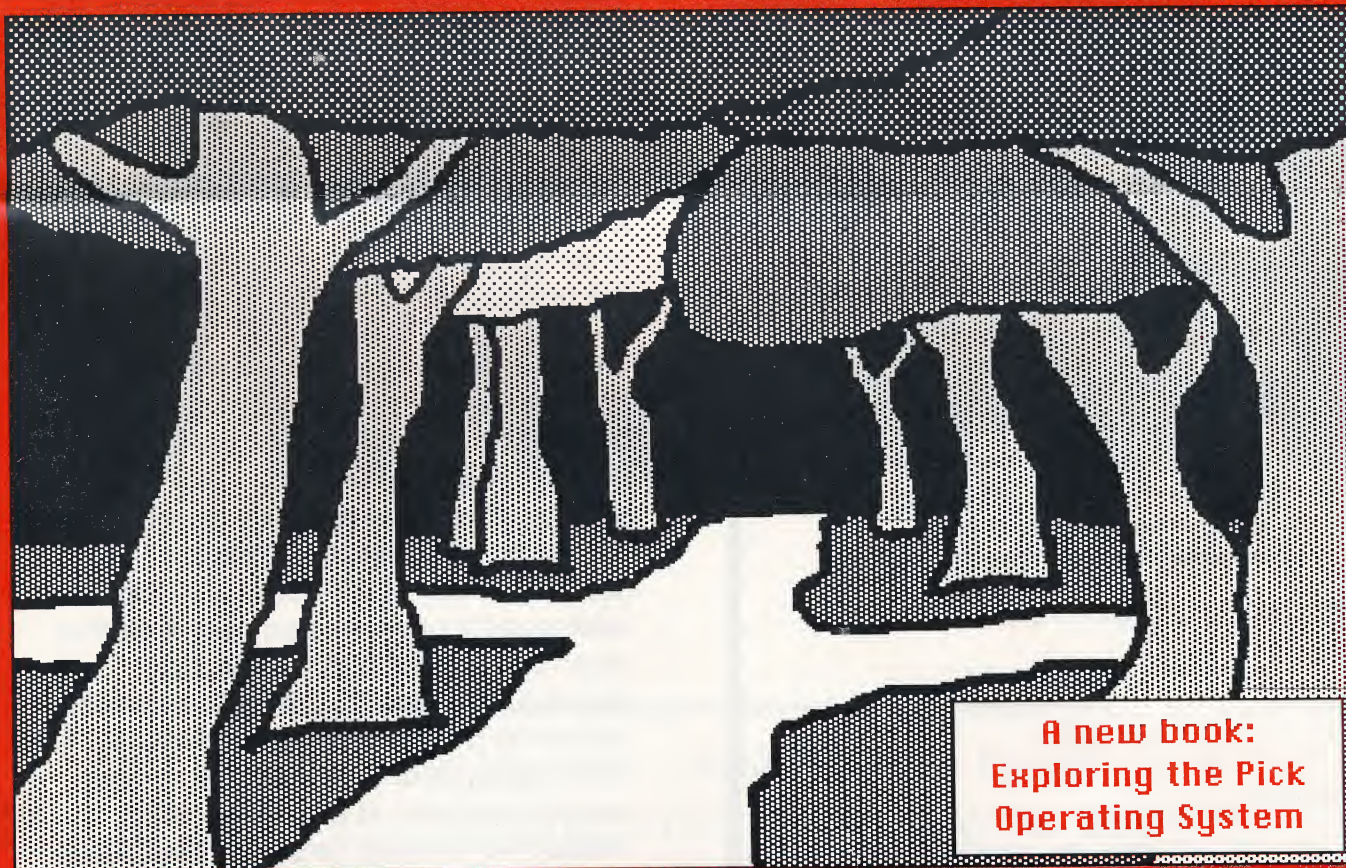
PRAGMA'S

PRODUCT PROFILES

News and Information for Pick™ Operating System Users

Issue Number 19

October 1985



**A new book:
Exploring the Pick
Operating System**

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New Pick Book a Disappointment

A book about Pick has finally been published. *Exploring the Pick Operating System*, by Jonathan E. Sisk and Steve VanArsdale, is now available from Hayden Book Co., 10 Mulholland Dr., Hasbrouck Heights, NJ 07604 (\$29.95 hardcover, 240 pages, ISBN 0-8104-6286-9). Unfortunately, we found the book lacking in many ways and very disappointing overall. We're only going to be able to recommend it for a very special situation, which is if you are an experienced computer user and find yourself using a Pick system, and you have absolutely no other documentation to rely on. In that case, this book is better than nothing. But if you are trying to supplement your existing documentation, or if you are looking for an explanation of Pick to give to managers and other non-programmers, or if you are looking for a good analysis of Pick to help you decide whether or not to use the operating system, this book will have nothing to offer.

The first thing we didn't like was that the book never clearly explains to whom it is directed. Is the book for managers? First time users? Experienced programmers? There's no preface to explain the book's prerequisites of the reader. The last sentence on the back cover blurb claims the book "is an important reference for professionals", but does that mean any professional, or just data processing people? (The back cover also claims the book is a "thorough analysis of an operating system", but we didn't find any analytical content at all.) Interestingly, a press release we received begins by describing potential readers as "programmers and experienced professional computer users". Too bad that warning isn't on the book itself, since anyone without a lot of computer experience who gets their hands on this book will quickly get bogged down in technical details and confusing explanations.

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Most of the book is a regurgitation of the reference manuals that are available for most Pick machines, with some tutorial information thrown in. There're a few potentially interesting pages at the beginning and end of the book, but they're very poorly written. We can often guess at what the authors are trying to say, but they do a lousy job of saying it. Here's just a sample of the nonsense and poor writing that drove us up the wall:

Page 2: In many respects you are looking at a window to a new era in computers. This book represents a window on a new generation of computer systems. The authors have had the opportunity to look through this window for some time; we've been using a computer system that is part of the next era.

Page 4: ...users make the transition to PICK gradually. Introduced by flat-file technicians and reference books, the system is used with conventional approaches at first-- indexed files, batch processing, and online updates of the indexed files. These approaches work well enough at first; PICK accommodates these approaches easily.

Page 8: At the end of the book you'll go on your way with a

load of mementos in the Appendixes.

Page 20: This discussion of file-defining items would not be complete without mention of one of the secrets of the PICK world. Experienced PICK users will often speak of the "Q-pointer".

Page 28: So, you'll have to have a valid user ID to log onto the PICK System and the password associated with it. See your "travel agent", the system administrator.

Page 39: When this option is used, the system printer will suddenly print a full-page greeting. On every tour someone sheepishly collects such a memento.

Page 40: A second class of TCL "magic words" is known, not surprisingly, as TCL-II verbs.

Page 146: Nothing as powerful as the PICK System can be as simple as it appears to be.

Page 171: Let's tour the sphere and meet the players.

Page 179: ...the IBM PC-XT is...\$495... Its low cost may be in recognition of the long journey from the mainframe to the user.

Looking through windows? Flat-file technicians? Load of mementos? Logging on to passwords? Travel agents? Magic words? Touring the sphere? Apparently the editor of this book checked for spelling and nothing more.

The beginning and end of the book also try to convince the reader that Pick is a great thing and that the future for Pick is promising, but the writing is in the style of a marketing person from Pick Systems, not an objective author doing an unbiased analysis. For example,

Page 2: ...this virtual memory, relational data base, user-oriented system may well represent a milestone in this generation of computers.

Page 180: The system's advanced approach may provide a path to the environment of the future.

Page 182: ...PICK is the predecessor of artificial intelligence...

Page 183: This will be the market in which artificial intelligence will be developed. It is here that the PICK Operating System will contribute, after twenty-odd years of quiet patience. PICK is already being spoken of as an AI knowledge-base manager...

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Those kinds of statements might be acceptable in a sales brochure, but they don't help this book at all. The technically-oriented readers who this book was apparently designed for would undoubtedly prefer concrete evidence of why Pick is better than some other environment, but comparisons are nowhere to be found. The closest the book ever comes to an actual comparison with another system is on page 15, when ISAM, KSAM and VSAM access methods are dismissed offhandedly. Will this book help readers determine that Pick has a good spooler but a lousy editor, or that ordered files can only be traversed in one direction and only after a sort, or that there is no application-style input processor? Probably not, because critical analysis is simply missing from this book altogether. As a result, the book's opening claims about Pick being user-friendly are never actually supported. In fact, the book doesn't even help Pick look particularly programmer-friendly.

The first chapter is intended to be an introduction to Pick. Jargon is used immediately and far too heavily. At page 2, the reader already bumps into terms like "reorganize disk space dynamically", without any definitions or hint of what they mean. Even the concept of an operating system itself is never defined or discussed. Even though there's a glossary in the back, the excessive jargon is just one more guarantee that readers who aren't already on intimate terms with some kind of computer will probably give up on the book after reading the first few pages.

Chapter 1 also includes a too-brief discussion (primarily a chronological list of major events) of the history of Pick. It admits Pick is "relatively little-known" and states it is a "victim of its history", but doesn't really explain why. Only the "clamor and competing claims" of the competition is offered as a reason why "many of the system's features have been ignored or discounted".

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The last section of the first chapter hints at how unspectacular the rest of the book will be, since "it is beyond the capabilities of one book to explain an entire operating system and how to use it productively... It is sufficient to discuss what the system can do and how the user can utilize the major PICK processes". The book then introduces an analogy that treats Pick as a spherical world, with logon accounts being "buildings on the PICK surface", and the SYSTEM file as "the global directory containing the addresses of every building on the PICK world", and similar models for files, attributes, and values. A technically-oriented reader will be left hanging, since the discussion never finally describes what accounts, attributes, and the other pieces really are in an actual implementation.

At the end of the Chapter 1, the first of the book's meager 19 diagrams begin to show up. The diagrams are almost tokens, and don't really impart much information. They remind us of the silly block diagrams and flow charts you see so often in magazines like *Datamation*. Sometimes the diagrams are downright confusing or superfluous, such as the "reentrant" and "recursive" labels in a diagram on page 165, or the attempt to illustrate two different sized items on page 23.

We'd like to think that once readers have slugged their way through the first chapter, they'll realize what the book *should* clearly explain: that Pick is an easy-to-program, multi-user, timesharing operating system with good built-in data base management facilities. Unfortunately, readers will probably instead just end up with a lot of half-memorized new jargon.

Chapter 2 declares itself to be an overview of the Pick system, but it immediately dives into low-level details that prevent the reader from seeing the forest for the trees. Tools such as ACCESS and PROC are mentioned and even illustrated on the first page of the chapter, but there is no explanation of what they do. The order in which things are explained always

seems confused and disorganized. A vague description and illustration of frames and the virtual workspace appears on page 12, but is actually not really explained until Chapter 9. The concept of "group" is suddenly mentioned parenthetically as a substitute for "frame" in the middle of a list of file-definition attributes on page 16! Even though TCL is mentioned and illustrated on pages 11 and 13, we don't find out it stands for Terminal Control Language until page 18, and only then because it's being spelled out for the first time to explain that there's a PASSWORD command for changing the seventh attribute of the SYSTEM file! The table of delimiters on page 22 is another example of the book's pervasive rush to use details without giving the reader the benefit of the big picture: instead of using a nice top-down approach to describe attribute marks, then value marks as subdivisions of attributes, then subvalues as a division of values, the table lists the marks in reverse, in their hexadecimal order. The book seems to go out of its way to explain things from the bottom up, which is invariably more confusing.

Chapter 3 is devoted to TCL, or "Pick's surface", as the book puts it. The chapter explains how to log on, but then wanders into control characters, type-ahead, the BREAK key, and logging off, before finally giving some examples of actual useful commands. Even then, the first commands explained are the rather arcane arithmetic and radix conversion verbs, instead of the more important file manipulation commands. The examples are sloppily written in a lazy style that assumes the reader has used on-line systems before. Instead of clear instructions like "when the screen displays the message LOGON PLEASE:, use the keyboard to type the word SYSPROG and then hit the RETURN key", the reader is tersely told: "At the LOGON prompt, enter SYSPROG, followed by a <cr>".

Chapter 4 describes the editor in a tutorial fashion, making the reader create some items in a file. Page 59 tries to explain why:

The following example is the first of the three pieces of system information necessary to construct and execute an ACCESS command. The purpose here is to create the data in the file. Later, we will add dictionary items (piece 2) to define the data that will subsequently be displayed with an ACCESS sentence (piece 3).

What ACCESS is, or why the reader would want to use it, is not explained. That mystery is finally resolved in Chapter 5, which continues the tutorial by introducing ACCESS verbs. The description of ACCESS features is kept to a bare minimum. For example, single quotes are simply described as delimiters for item-ids, typically for "the display of one specific item". No mention is made of the fact that single quotes can be used to explicitly identify a whole list of items. Also sorely missing is some kind of complete table or syntax diagram showing all the possible parts of an ACCESS command.

Again using a tutorial style, Chapter 6 explains PROC by stepping the reader line by line

through about a half dozen examples. Unfortunately, there is no reference table or chart of all the PROC commands.

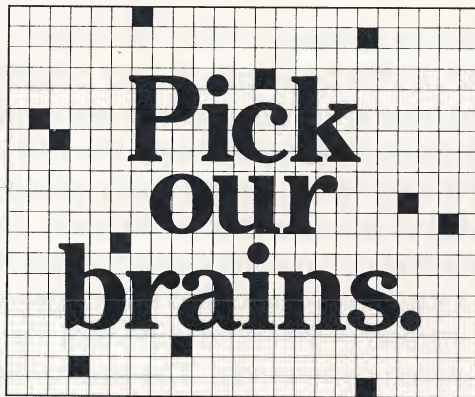
Chapter 7 is perhaps the most ridiculous chapter in the whole book because, although it is titled "PICK/BASIC: The Programming Language", the chapter's four pages only describe how to edit, compile, run, catalog and decatalog programs! The language itself is not described! The one sample game program on page 122 is only 18 statements that look like vanilla BASIC code for any computer. Nowhere is there a description of the Pick BASIC language, or even a clue as to where the reader can go to obtain a description! It's hard to believe someone actually published a book about Pick without including even the briefest description of allowable Pick BASIC statements.

Chapter 8 covers the spooler and backup verbs, but doesn't offer much more insight than the reference manuals for typical Pick systems. The authors certainly don't go out of their way to explain some of the tradeoffs a user encounters while using a Pick system. For example, page 129 states:

The PICK System constructs magnetic media in two ways. The first of these is referred to as a SAVE format, meaning that it was generated with the SAVE command. This type is typically created with the FILE-SAVE or ACCOUNT-SAVE procedures located in the SYSPROG account. The second type of media is called a T-DUMP. This can be the contents of a single file or multiple files. Since SAVE media is designed for use by PICK System processes, the T-DUMP format is more commonly used for data.

If you asked someone to explain the difference between a SAVE and a T-DUMP and you received an explanation like the above, would *you* be satisfied?

Chapter 9 is titled "Core Processes", and describes virtual memory management, workspace and frame structure, the ABS and monitor, and coldstarting. We wouldn't mind if this fairly esoteric chapter was reduced to a tiny appendix explaining how to boot a Pick machine. The extra pages gained could then



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be used for more important subjects like BASIC or ACCESS.

Chapter 10 tries to explain how to use all the pieces of a Pick system to put together an actual application. Unfortunately, the discussion begins with:

PICK provides a user interface (TCL), a system editor (EDITOR), and a data base retrieval language (ACCESS). An unusual aspect of the operating system is that a complete data base application system can be developed using only these intrinsic tools.

Are the authors being serious? A "complete" application system that uses the Pick editor for updates? Maybe so, if "complete" means no input error checking and no record locking or simultaneous access for multiple users. After all, those subjects are not discussed anywhere in the book (even though they are some of Pick's most important concepts)!

Instead of using four pages of verbiage and the three *Datamation*-style flow charts that purport to illustrate how to put together an application, Chapter 10 would have been much better if it continued the tutorial style of the earlier chapters and simply listed the code for a few procs, programs, and dictionary items that all worked together to maintain a mailing list or perform some other simple application.

Chapter 11 is a hodgepodge of information collected under the title of "Through the PICK Looking Glass". First comes a list of Pick licensees, but there are no addresses, phone numbers, purchase prices, or counts of machines shipped. A brief mention of Prime Information and Cosmos states that while the Revelation operating system is "not a true PICK System, it is a true emulation". A page

or so is devoted to plugging the XT and AT implementations, and another page makes the usual promises about the wonders of the forthcoming Open Architecture. ("Under development for five years, Open Architecture has been called the culmination of a 20-year effort.") The chapter ends with more pointless marketing hype about current and future computer generations and the important role Pick will supposedly play.

Appendix A is the previously mentioned glossary, and is perhaps the best written part of the book. Too bad that the care that went into the glossary definitions wasn't also lavished on the other 236 pages.

Appendix B is a list of Pick software vendors listed by application. Only cities and phone numbers are listed; street addresses are missing.

Appendix C is an ASCII table, Appendix D is three pages wasted on the format of items that define verbs (why bother?), Appendix E explains correlatives and conversions, and Appendix F documents all the dictionary definitions used in the various tutorials.

A recent special supplemental issue of *Byte* was devoted to the IBM PC and included a review of the Pick XT implementation. The author of that review remarked how he only received enough documentation to install and boot the system. Once the logon prompt appeared, he didn't know what to do next. He was an experienced computer user, and so this book could have helped him explore the system beyond that first prompt. In fact, we expect that Pick Systems will probably be shipping copies of the book along with their XT floppies to make up for the lack of documentation. That would at least help users who are already experienced with computers. But as we stated at the beginning of this review, that is about the only situation in which we can recommend this book. Even then, the reference manuals from just about any Pick vendor would probably serve just as well. Δ

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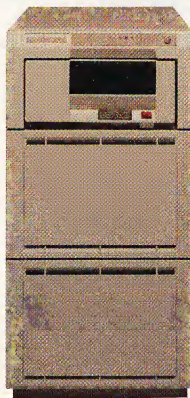
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